

# The Milgram Experiments: Cloning the Holocaust

[Jett Rucker](#)

Born in Brooklyn in 1933 to recent Jewish immigrants from Europe, Stanley Milgram was haunted most of his life by the Holocaust he narrowly missed. By the time he had gained his Ph.D. from Harvard and joined the faculty of Yale in 1960, he conceived a way to recreate at least what he supposed was the psychological milieu of the Holocaust: following orders to kill (or torture) strangers. It was, he revealed outside his formal publications, what SS guards must have done and felt—or not felt—as they herded crowds of innocent Jews to their deaths in gas chambers.

The experiment was fiendish enough in its own right, though it never physically harmed anyone. It involved a subject, the experimenter (often Milgram himself), and an “object”—a person realistically faking reactions to things the subject did at the behest of Milgram. Milgram instructed the subject to hurt the object by pressing numbered buttons that ostensibly administered electrical shocks at voltages shown by the numbers. The top button was labelled 450, and when it was pressed, the object portrayed utter agony, to the consternation of many of the subjects, most of whom nonetheless carried out instructions to press that button as well as the others labelled with lower, less “painful” voltages.

Most of the subjects, as it turned out, obeyed Milgram’s instructions to administer apparently painful shocks to the object, even repeatedly, as Milgram reassured them that the experiment was “for science,” which it quite arguably was. The experiments and their results, which ultimately formed the subject of a book<sup>[1]</sup> by Milgram, made his name famous even to the present day. Other books<sup>[2]</sup> on the scientist and his experiments have argued for their infamy, pointing out that some of the subjects sustained lasting psychological damage from their experience in the experiments.

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PROF. STANLEY MILGRAM, DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY,  
YALE UNIVERSITY, NEW HAVEN, CONN. I want to take part in  
this study of memory and learning. I am between the ages of 20 and  
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*Advertisement for the recruiting of the Milgram experiment subjects*

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Milgram's original inspiration, and the objective he initially gave for the experiments, was to gauge the willingness of people to follow "orders," or authoritative requests, to harm strangers, something he felt Germans—or those Germans involved in the famed "crimes against humanity", at any rate—surpassed other people in, including of course the random Americans he recruited to serve as the subjects of his experiment.

It didn't turn out that way, as a [recent article](#) in the *Aeon* webzine details. The subjects turned out, to an utterly appalling extent, to be willing, whatever their private reservations, to inflict shocks that seemed

nearly lethal upon strangers whom they could clearly see and hear, merely at the instigation of a “researcher” who was conducting an experiment. The indictment that this levelled at the ostensibly random sample of subjects and the population they were drawn from was so horrific that the author of the article states that Milgram’s plans for subsequently testing a group of Germans were abandoned for being “pointless.”

This change of plans, which the author does not explicitly attribute to Milgram’s own thinking, illustrates the inherent weakness of all human inquiry, be it into psychology, history, crimes, or even the physical sciences: inquiry is always preceded by a hypothesis (e.g., “Germans are mindless automatons who will commit any heinous crime they are ordered to.”), and tests of the experiment (with Americans, the group ready to hand around Yale) either support the methodology or, as in this case, leave hardly any room for Germans to be worse than the group on whom the methodology was test-run.

Does this make it pointless to go ahead and test the Germans? It does if you stick to the original hypothesis (Germans are worse than others). But if you have the imagination—and the disposition—to *change* the hypothesis to something like, “Germans are *better*—at least, better than the Americans so far tested—at resisting immoral orders,” a very good point remains for going on with the rest of the plan. Such seems not have been the disposition of the “scientist” involved, nor of the author of the article, who mentions his own descent from Jews in the article. Perhaps the proposition would even encounter difficulty in getting funded—funders prefer to finance inquiries that promise to yield conclusions pleasing to the funders.

Oddly, my inquiry into the long and vigorous life of what I’ll dub the Milgram Industry (Milgram himself died in 1984) did not turn up any study in which different groups were compared for their susceptibility to following criminal orders, even though the *Aeon* article mentions that Milgram-type experiments were conducted in many places, including “West Germany.”

Milgram was inspired in designing his namesake experiments by his notions of what the Holocaust entailed—people (Germans) consciously administering pain and death to presumably innocent strangers (Jews and others, who in fact outnumbered the Jews). Of course, in wars such as the one in which the worst parts of the Holocaust occurred, people are consciously administering pain, death, and destruction to strangers who have given no previous offense, though from the cockpit of a bomber twenty thousand feet above “the target,” interaction with the victims is absent by quite a distance. And in World War II, the Germans manifestly failed to gain first place in the deadly competition of killing and maiming “the enemy.”

People out to prove something gruesome about the Holocaust, or innately evil about the Germans often run into a buzz-saw, and they always contrive exquisite machinations for recovering from the misadventure, even as Milgram himself seems to have papered over and otherwise misrepresented forms of the experiments he conducted that forcefully contradicted the initial, sensational results with which he managed to propel himself to fame<sup>[3]</sup>. An example of this was Jan Karski, who in 1943 was sent to the Belzec “extermination camp” only to discover, and report to his superiors, that he found no evidence of killing there, but only of transfer of the inmates to other, unknown destinations. That fiasco was [memorably chronicled](#) by Friedrich Jansson in the Winter 2014 issue of *Inconvenient History*.

Milgram’s initial goal of delineating the inherent bestiality of Germans was ultimately derailed, but the silver lining on that cloud far outshone any darkness cast by the failure of his long-forgotten thesis. How

much better to show the world so graphically that *we're* all *Nazis*! At the present juncture, critical studies of Milgram's actual methods, along with evidence of portions of his findings that he suppressed or misrepresented, are casting into doubt his conclusions as to what we all (inextricably including those Nazis, I should hope) really *are* like.

But also at this juncture, there is growing reason to question not just what we (and you-know-who) are all really like, but as well, Milgram's grotesque misapprehension of just *what* the National Socialists really did to their "victims," and *why*, and even *how*. In keeping with the dominant mythology, Milgram envisioned that, at the very least, the implementers of the Final Solution were soulless zombies whose very constitutions prevented them from having the faintest glimmer of empathy for their prey.

But between the Germans' amply documented preference to remove Jews *from* their midst and *to* other places, and the eventual desperate reversal of that impulse that caused the Germans to bring thousands of Jews *back into* Germany as the war turned against them, Milgram's original phantasmagoria of SS guards banally inflicting genocidal pain and death upon an entire race begins to fade away into the mists that enshroud B-grade horror movies. It's not, of course, that no such thing ever *did* happen—it most certainly did.

It is, rather, that it is not *what* happened. Milgram seems to have demonstrated precious little interest in these truths, which in any case were neither known nor suspected in the circles in which he travelled. So Milgram's experiments, their incredible results, their unexpected conclusions, and the manipulations performed by Milgram in publicizing them, all were based on a myth.

Not just a myth about what Germans are like, but beneath that one, still another, about what they did.

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#### Notes:

- [1] Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (New York: Harpercollins, 1974).
- [2] Thomas Blass, *The Man Who Shocked the World: The Life and Legacy of Stanley Milgram* ( New York: Basic Books, 2004).
- [3] One good analysis is by Gina Perry. *Behind the Shock Machine: The Untold Story behind the Notorious Milgram Psychology Experiments*. The New Press, New York, 2012.

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